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Special features of a nongraded elementary school program are reviewed as a guide to those wishing to implement the concept as a way to provide individualized instruction and quality education for all students. Emphases include the individual differences of students, the restrictive character of graded schools, curriculum patterns, levels of instruction, grouping for instructional purposes, progress reports, school organization, and subject scheduling. Nineteen charts, graphs, and other figures indicate the distinctive features of a nongraded elementary school program. A bibliography of 23 items published between 1960 and 1967 is appended. (JK)

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NONGRADING YOUR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

BY PAUL C. SOWERS

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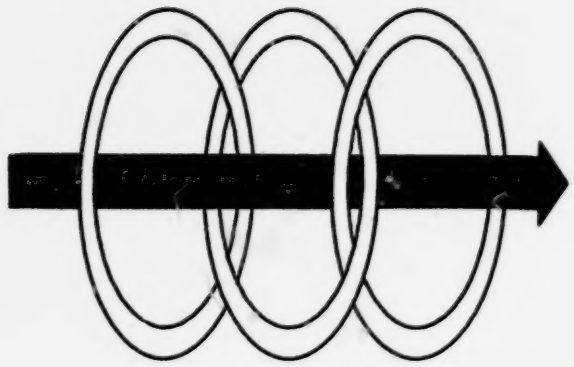
Mr. Paul C. Sowers, who holds a B. S. in Business Administration from Oklahoma University and a B. S., M. A., and Specialist degree in Education from Northern Arizona University, was involved in both elementary school teaching and administration for several years in New Mexico and in Arizona. More recently he taught in the College of Education and directed the Elementary Training School at Northern Arizona University.

Currently he is Elementary Education Consultant at the Northern Arizona Supplementary Education Center.

NONGRADING YOUR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL



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INTRODUCTION

The NASEC monograph series, *Spectrum*, was developed as a means of sharing recent developments with educators and other interested persons in the hope that these developments might prove useful in the solution of educational problems which face our region and the nation. They represent a forum where the classroom teacher, as well as the professional consultant, can be heard. They are designed to stimulate thinking toward educational change and may at times contain controversial issues. It is our hope to use controversy as a tool for change and we welcome the opportunity to publish the viewpoints that others might have concerning these issues.

This particular issue of *Spectrum* deals with the nongraded elementary school and was written by Mr. Paul Sowers, who is the Elementary Education Specialist for the Northern Arizona Supplementary Education Center. Mr. Sowers has been a school administrator in the Southwest for many years and has specialized in the development of new approaches to elementary curriculum and school organization. We feel that the nongraded school is no longer very controversial, but the implementation of it in a variety of ways may be. We hope that this paper will stimulate your thought concerning one of the most relevant educational issues before us today.

JOHN L. GRAY
Senior Staff Officer of the
U.S. Senate Subcommittee on
Indian Education

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART		PAGE
1.	Children Are Different	1
2.	Graded Schools Are Restrictive	2
3.	Nongrading Is Open-End	5
4.	Curriculum Patterns	7
5.	Levels of Instruction	8
6.	Grouping	10
7.	Progress Records and Reports	12
8.	Organization and Scheduling	15
9.	Summary	17
	Selected Bibliography	18

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE		PAGE
1.	Approximate Mid-Year Achievement, Third Grade	2
2.	Approximate Mid-Year Achievement, Fifth Grade	2
3.	Approximate Mid-Year Achievement, Eighth Grade	2
4.	The Graded School	3
5.	Slow Learner in a Graded School	3
6.	Average Learner in a Graded School	4
7.	Fast Learner in a Graded School	4
8.	The Nongraded Elementary School	5
9.	Slow Learner in the Nongraded Elementary School	5
10.	Average Learner in the Nongraded Elementary School	6
11.	Fast Learner in the Nongraded Elementary School	6
12.	Unit Concept Development with Increasing Integration	7
13.	Reading Levels	8
14.	Arithmetic Levels	9
15.	Levels in All Instructional Areas	10
16.	Student Placement Card	11
17.	Individual Progress Record	13
18.	Class Change During School Year	14
19.	Suggested Organization for a Nongraded, Team Teaching School	16

NONGRADING YOUR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

1. CHILDREN ARE DIFFERENT

Research and experience have demonstrated conclusively that children of the same chronological age differ greatly mentally, socially, culturally, emotionally, and physically. Variations in maturity and degrees of readiness are to be found throughout the growth and development process. This knowledge is now commonplace and deserves first consideration in fitting the school program to the needs of the children.

The range of overall school achievement for a third grade, and subsequently for a fifth and an eighth grade, reveals vast differences in general accomplishment. A study of the separate subjects would, of course, show similar variations.

Approximate Mid-Year Achievement, Third Grade

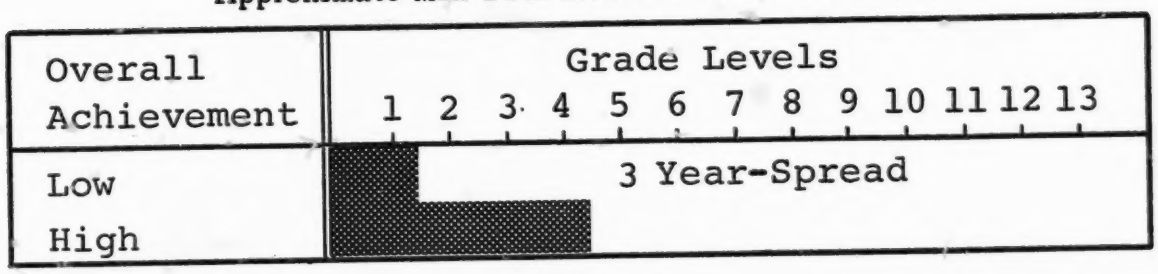

Figure 1

Approximate Mid-Year Achievement, Fifth Grade

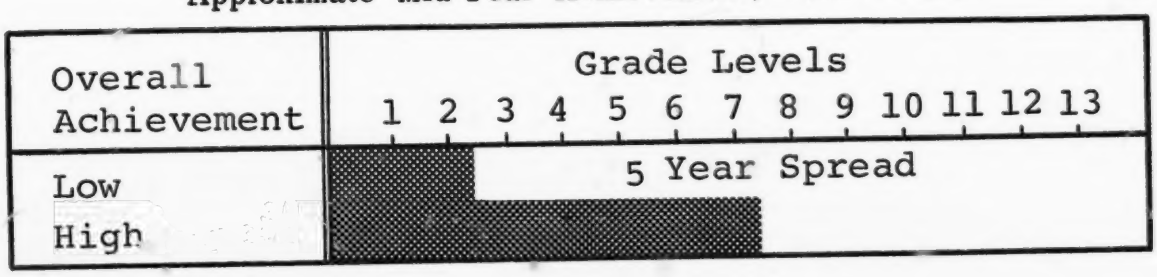

Figure 2

Approximate Mid-Year Achievement, Eighth Grade

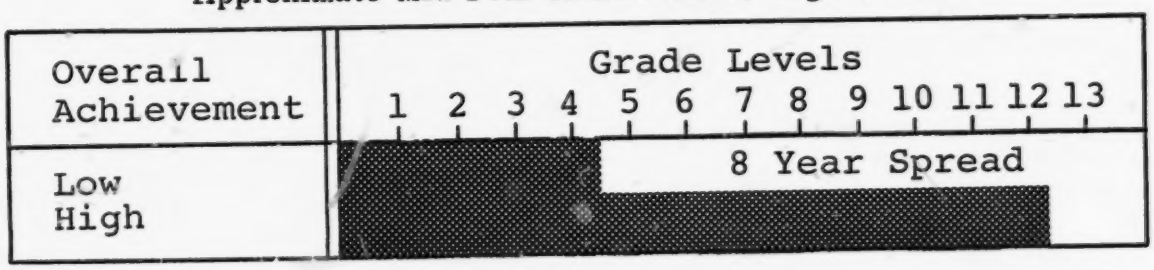

Figure 3

Figures 1, 2, and 3 indicate that the number of years of spread in actual achievement is approximately equivalent to the number designation of the grade level. A study of mental, social, cultural, emotional and physical factors would disclose significant individual differences in these areas also.

2. GRADED SCHOOLS ARE RESTRICTIVE

The concept of the graded school was borrowed from Germany and was a convenient vehicle for getting the American public school system

organized and operating during the nineteenth century. From the very beginning, however, this arrangement has been extremely inhibitive to recognition of individual pupil differences. It is based on the false assumption that children of the same chronological age are capable of approximately the same degree and rate of achievement. The graded school and its box-like restrictions are represented best by illustration.

The Graded School

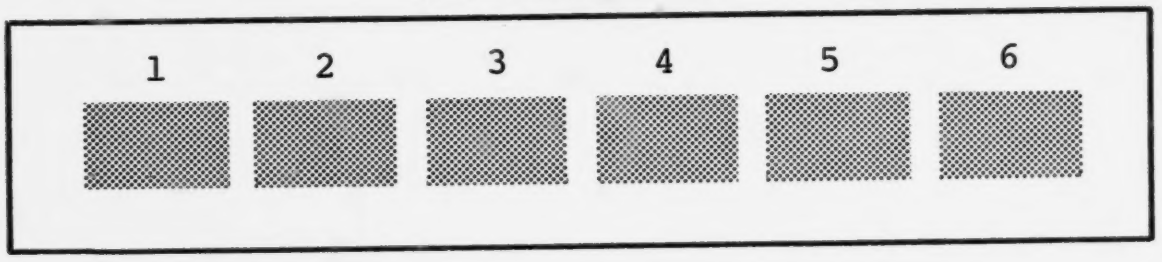

Figure 4

Each grade, Figure 4, is an isolated box within itself. Readiness to enter the first grade is determined by chronological age, and from then on every child is expected to cover a specified amount of material in each subject area during the passage of successive school years. How does this affect the slow, the average, and the fast learner?

Slow Learner in a Graded School

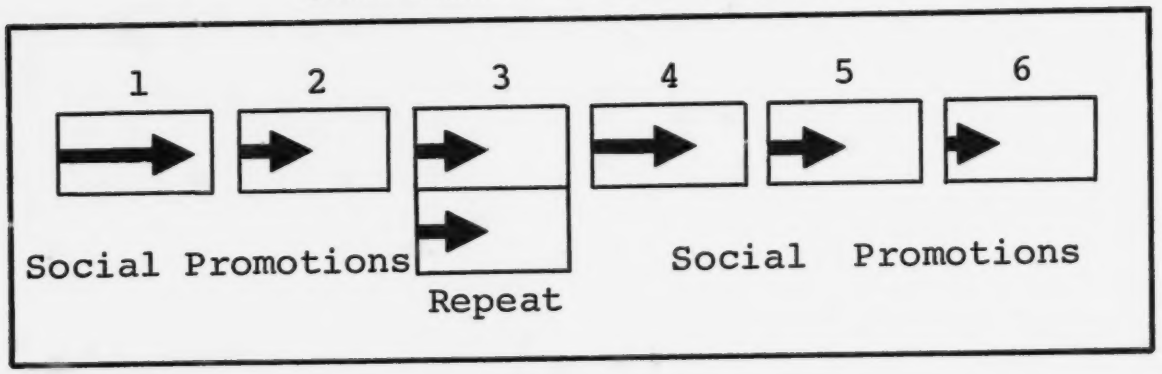

Figure 5

The slow learner in the graded school, Figure 5, seldom completes the requirements and may be either socially promoted or retained. If socially promoted, he proceeds to the next year's work without sufficient understanding, experiencing increasing frustration, and usually falling farther and farther behind. If retained, he must repeat a large amount of material and seldom does any better than in the previous year. In either

case he rarely experiences success or school-satisfaction, and progressively dislikes school more and more. He has thus become a potential dropout.

Average Learner in a Graded School

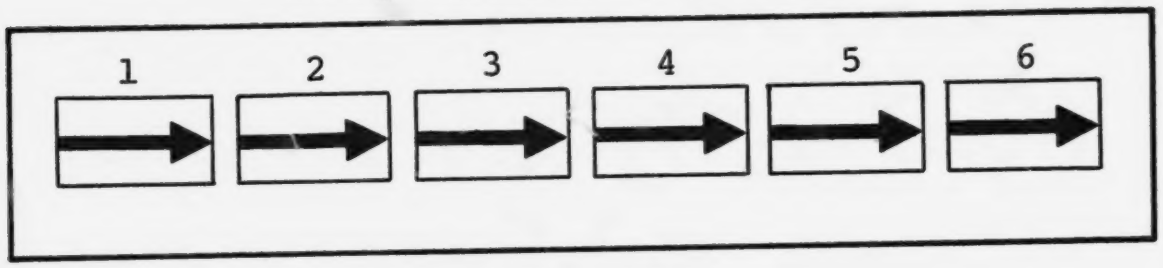

Figure 6

The average learner, Figure 6, will move through the grades according to general expectations.

Fast Learner in a Graded School

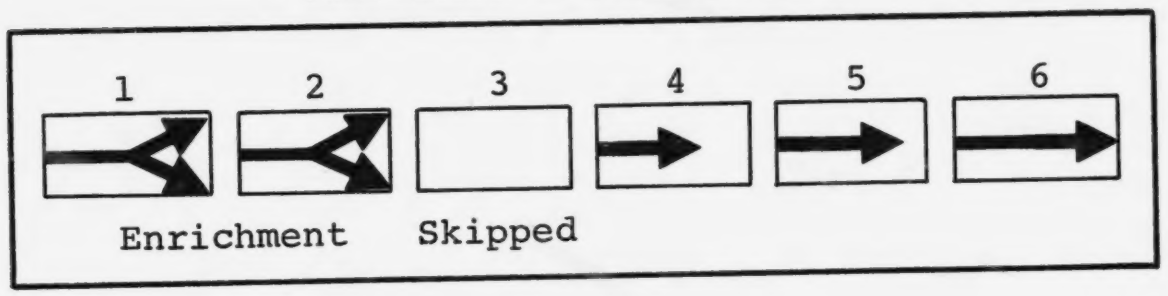

Figure 7

The fast learner, Figure 7, must be accommodated by enrichment within the particular grade or by skipping a year. Beneficial enrichment requires extensive individual planning, numerous materials, and much teacher time. Skipping a year entirely deprives the child of many necessary developmental concepts and may result in later difficulties in achievement or personal adjustment.

From these illustrations it is apparent that although the graded school may provide well for the average learner, it does not lend itself to the problems of the slow and the fast learners. Makeshift arrangements such as retention and skipping do little to solve the problem of appropriate placement of children.

3. NONGRADING IS OPEN-END

Nongrading is open-end because it erects no arbitrary grade barriers but allows each student to progress according to his own capabilities. It provides a type of instructional organization which allows for the contingencies involved in meeting the individual needs of the children.

The slow learner is not continuously pushed to meet specified expectations by an end-of-year deadline or suffer failure and retention. Neither is he socially promoted and disruptively jumped over essential learnings in order to keep him up with his age group. The fast learner is permitted to advance at his own pace, without skipping or being delayed to conform to the rate of those less speedy.

A nongraded elementary school would accommodate its students as shown in Figures 8, 9, 10 and 11. Progress would be continuous according to the individual abilities and proper placement of each child.

The Nongraded Elementary School

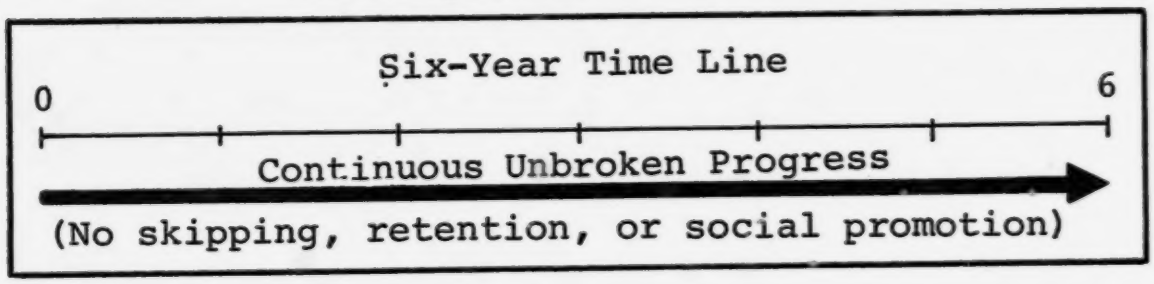

Figure 8

Slow Learner in the Nongraded Elementary School

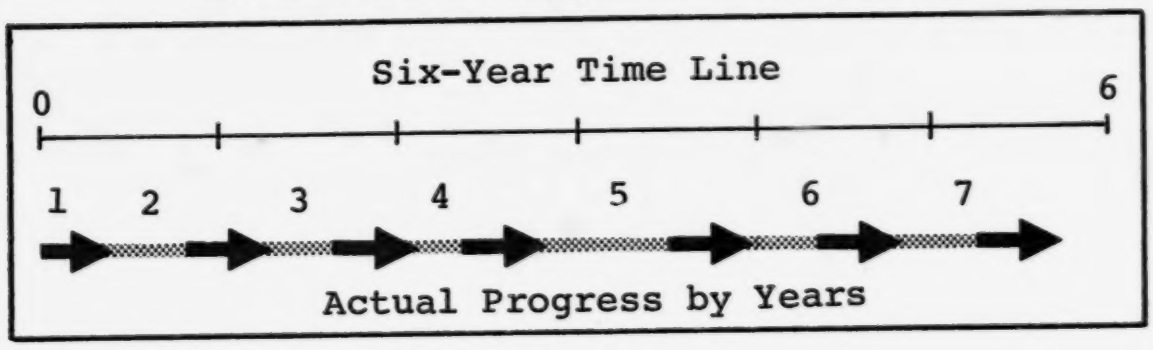

Figure 9

Average Learner in the Nongraded Elementary School

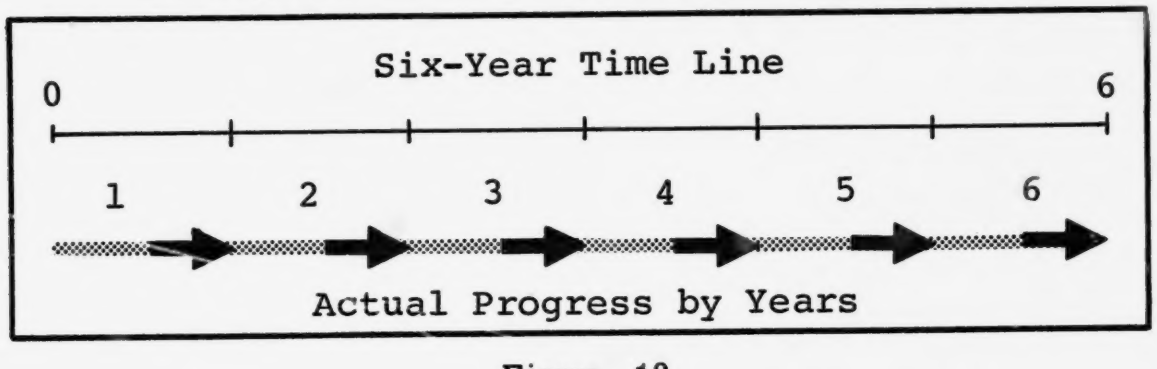

Figure 10

Fast Learner in the Nongraded Elementary School

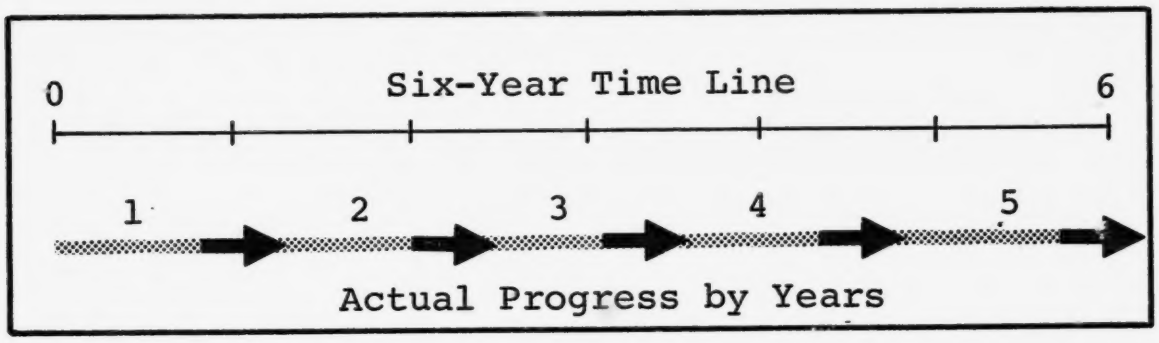

Figure 11

The question arises as to what happens when a slow or fast learner gets too far out of his own age group? Each student's profile chart will not only indicate levels of actual achievement, but will also give evaluations concerning social, emotional, cultural, and physical factors. If it is indicated that a fast learner is capable of moving ahead academically, but is socially and emotionally immature, then he may be held back for a while and be given enrichment at a lower level until his maturity reaches a point where he can comfortably move ahead again at his normal rate.

In a like manner, if a slow learner gets so far behind that social and emotional problems become apparent, then he may be allowed to move ahead more rapidly to a level where he can function without frustration. His progress might then be slowed down again, gradually bringing his academic progress into closer balance with the other factors. Proper placement must always be determined by consideration of the whole child.

4. CURRICULUM PATTERNS

Because of the knowledge explosion and rapid changes in society, a curriculum which concentrates essentially on the assimilation of facts is no longer adequate. To learn all the facts is now impossible and not even desirable. Knowledge is accumulating too rapidly and facts are changing daily.

Of course, the basic skills must still be systematically taught, but the overall process of education must be centered upon a research approach. This will mean the teaching of the fundamental structures, concepts, and methods of inquiry within each major content area. It can be accomplished by concentration on carefully selected units of study in which these basic principles are presented and practiced through increasingly difficult levels of understanding.

With this type of preparation, the child will learn how to face new problems, whether in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, or special activities, and be able to apply appropriate methods of inquiry in his search for meaningful solutions. Such solutions would progressively involve more and more integration of information between related areas of learning and thus establish comprehensive insights. For an illustration of this type of concept development see Figure 12.

Unit Concept Development with Increasing Integration

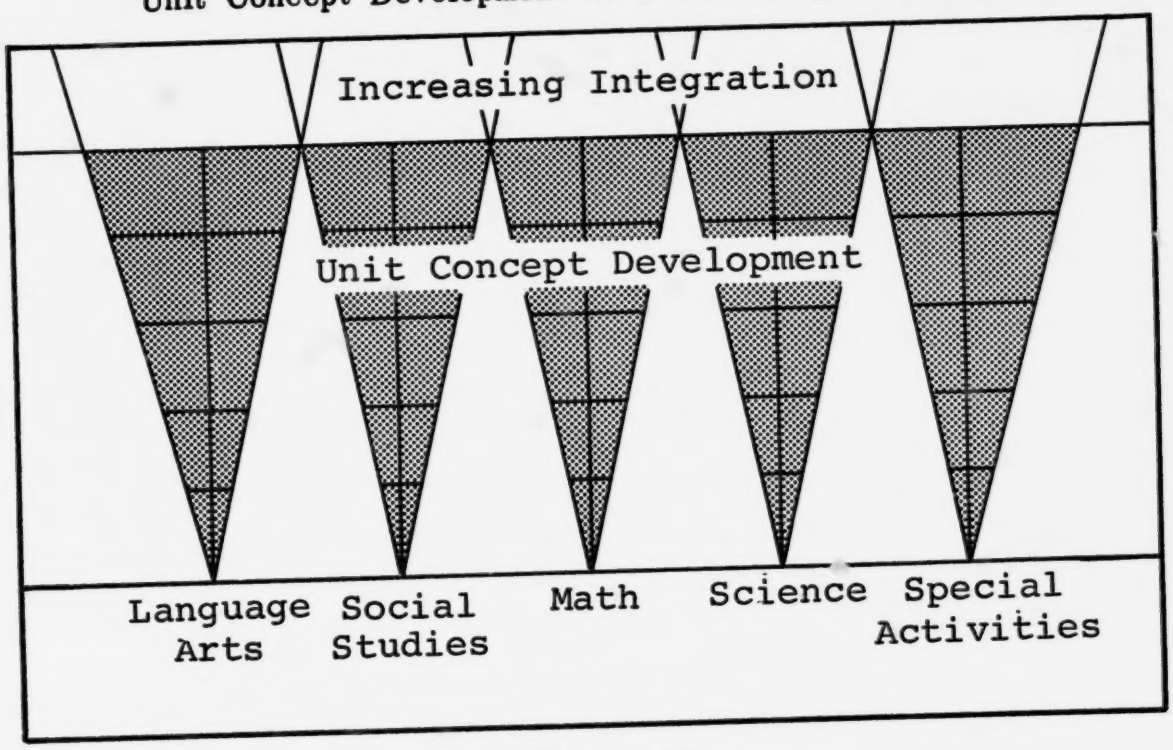

Figure 12

5. LEVELS OF INSTRUCTION

Most of the nongraded programs are presently based on language arts factors, particularly reading levels. Some include mathematics, while social studies and science are progressively being brought into the pattern along with special activities.

The publishing companies are still oriented more or less to the grade concept even though grade designations may be removed from the books. Publishers are, however, moving toward unit concept development, structure, and methods of inquiry as indicated in the preceding discussion of curriculum patterns. Thus, many of the textbooks are now easily adapted to a logical progression of levels suitable to a nongraded program.

As time goes on, a larger and larger portion of the available materials will be adjusted to this new concept, and will more adequately deal with the fact that children are different; that they develop at variable rates, learn best by wholes, and are motivated most effectively by experiences of success within their individual capabilities. Please see Figures 13 and 14.

Reading Levels

Level	Content
K	Initial Readiness and Adjustment
1	Readiness
2	Pre-Primer
3	Primer
4	First Reader
5	Second Reader[1]
6	Second Reader[2]
7	Third Reader[1]
8	Etc.

Figure 13

Co-basal and enrichment materials should be used as required to supplement the basic reading levels indicated in Figure 13.

Arithmetic Levels

Level	Content
1	Readiness
2	Book 1
3	Book 2
4	Book 3
5	Book 4
6	Book 5
7	Book 6
8	Book 7
9	Book 8
10	Etc.

Figure 14

The levels in arithmetic, Figure 14, could be more specifically limited to certain chapters within a book if desired.

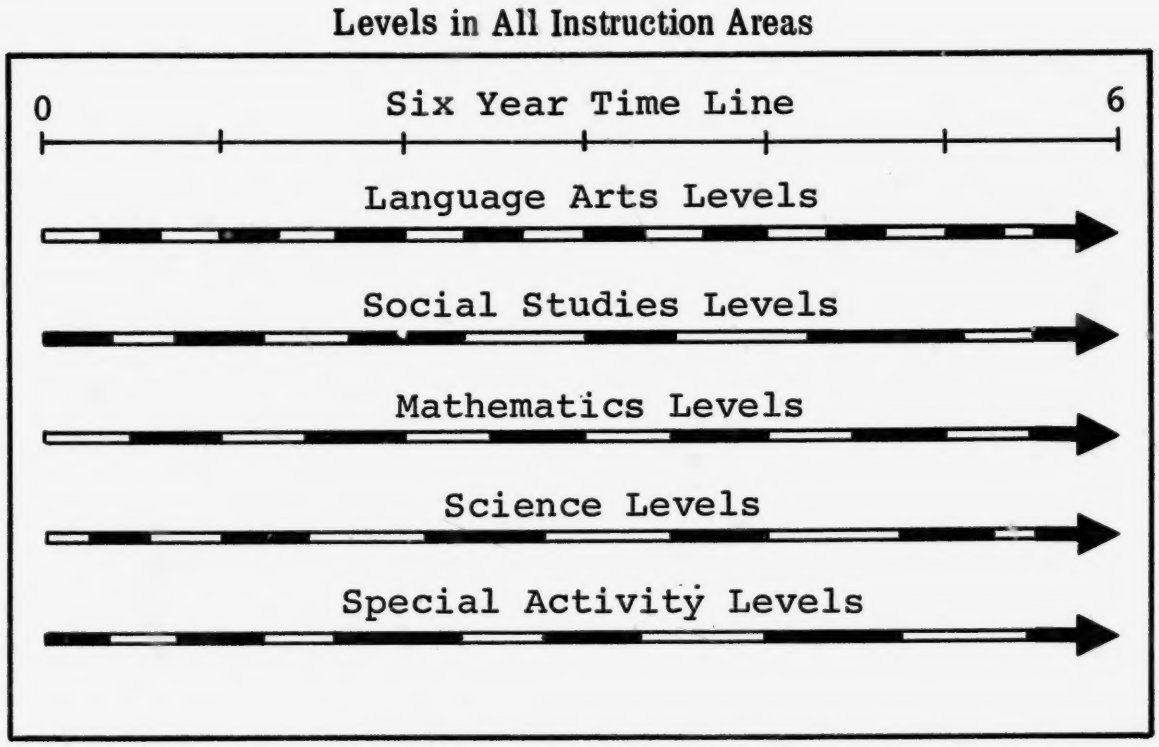

Figure 15

Figure 15 illustrates a program which has broken all instructional areas into levels. A student would progress through each area at his own rate. The levels would vary in length and complexity with increasing integration facilitated by team teaching arrangements. After vacations, illness, or family moves, a child would always begin where he left off.

6. GROUPING

Grouping here refers to the placement of each child in his proper levels of instruction with due consideration being given to social, emotional, and physical factors. Of course, the basic factor in each case is achievement, with adjustment as necessary to the other considerations of overall growth and development.

Initial achievement levels should be established by testing, then entered on a student placement card along with the other data needed for proper placement as indicated in Figure 16. In this example, space is provided for grouping in all major instructional areas. However, as indicated previously, most nongraded elementary grouping is presently based on language arts, reading in particular, with some plans including mathematics. Extension into the other areas would be a matter of local determination.

Student Placement Card

Last Name	First	Initial	M F Sex	Yrs. Mos. Age
			Date	

Present Achievement

Subject Area	Instructional Level	Criteria Used
Language Arts		
Social Studies		
Mathematics		
Science		
Other Areas:		

Considerations for Special Placement

Factor	Comment
Leader ( )	
Isolate ( )	
Emotional ( )	
Health ( )	
Speech ( )	
Other Problems: ( )	

Figure 16

(Fig. 16, continued)

Proper Placement

Subject Area	Class Designation	Comment
Language Arts		
Social Studies		
Mathematics		
Science		
Other Areas:		

7. PROGRESS RECORDS AND REPORTS

Once a child is properly placed, how do you follow and report his progress through the various levels of instruction? Figure 17 shows an individual progress record which would indicate at all times just where the child is. This represents a consolidated picture, but if desired a separate form could be made for each instructional area. By the inclusion of marks showing excellent, good, or satisfactory progress, it could also serve as a basic source in reporting to parents. With a list of carefully defined levels of instruction attached, used in conjunction with parent-teacher conferences, this report should provide comprehensive insight into the progress and abilities of the child.

Individual Progress Record

Last Name _____ First _____ Initial _____ Sex M___ F___

Level	Language Arts		Social Studies		Mathematics		Science		Other	
	Date Complete	Mark	Date Complete	Mark	Date Complete	Mark	Date Complete	Mark	Date Complete	Mark
1										
2										
3										
4										
Etc.										
↓										

Explanation of Marks:

E Excellent Progress

G Good Progress

S Satisfactory Progress

(Note: Definition of levels attached)

Figure 17

If children are properly grouped at the beginning of each school term, there should be a minimum of reassignment necessary throughout the year. The great number of average children will proceed through the levels close to annual expectations, with regrouping necessary only for those who have become instructional isolates because of initial misplacement or because of excessively slow or rapid rates of learning. For instance, if a child were properly grouped for reading to begin with, then he would be provided enough levels to keep him busy for the full year, and transfers during that time would not be necessary except for the reasons above indicated.

Since movement to other classes will occasionally become advisable, however, a proper procedure must be planned. Figure 18 shows a class-change form designed for this purpose.

The reason for the change should be carefully explained to the parents and the child, and be approved by both the sending teacher and the receiving teacher. As far as possible, all professional personnel should be in agreement that the change will be in the best interest of the child.

Class Change During School Year

Last Name	First	Initial	M__F__ Sex	Date
_____	_____	_____		_____

Subject _____ Present Class ____ Present Level ____

Change Recommended:

New Class _____ New Level _____

Reasons for the Change: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Reactions of Parent and Child: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Figure 18

(Fig. 18, continued)

Approved By:

Sending Teacher _____

Receiving Teacher _____

Principal _____

Others: _____

_____

_____

Effective Date of Change: _____

8. ORGANIZATION AND SCHEDULING

There are many different ways that the teachers, classes, and subjects can be organized within a nongraded school. When nongrading is combined with team teaching, the resultant flexibility provides the best and most numerous possibilities to build programs that will meet individual student needs.

How should the primary grades be organized? Should teachers in the middle grades be expected to be proficient in and teach all subjects? How should the program be extended into the junior and senior high schools? Many such questions must be answered before a comprehensive program can be envisioned in relation to the specific needs of the community.

Figure 19 suggests one form of organization for a nongraded, team teaching school, which could be changed as the situation required. The homogeneous grouping indicated, based on achievement, would be modified by consideration of social, emotional, and physical factors as necessary to meet the special needs of the children. With these considerations the actual grouping could, in fact, be better described as selective rather than homogeneous.

Suggested Organization for a Nongraded, Team Teaching School

Years Self-Contained	First and Second Years
	Homogeneous Reading Base
1	Reading + all other subjects (self-contained)
2	Reading + all other subjects (self-contained)

Years Teamed	Third Through Sixth Year		
	Homogeneous Reading Base	Homogeneous Math Base	Homogeneous by Activity
3 4	Lang. Arts + Soc. Std. Team 1	Math + Science Team 2	Special Activities Team 3
5 6	Lang. Arts + Soc. Std. Team 4	Math + Science Team 5	Special Activities Team 6

Years Teamed	Seventh Through Twelfth Year				
	Each Major Subject Homogeneously Grouped				
7 8 9	Lang. Arts Team 7	Soc. Std. Team 8	Math Team 9	Science Team 10	Special Activities Team 11
10 11 12	Lang. Arts Team 12	Soc. Std. Team 13	Math Team 14	Science Team 15	Special Activities Team 16

Figure 19

During the first and second years the children would be in self-contained classrooms based primarily on their reading ability. The teacher would handle all subjects taught during the course of the day.

The teachers in the third and fourth years, and subsequently in the fifth and sixth years, would be teamed over a two year period in closely related subject areas. This would allow some degree of specialization and consequently result in better preparation and greater teaching competence.

With increasing complexity of content, the teachers of years seven through nine and ten through twelve would be teamed over a three year span with specialization in one major subject area. The teams thus specialized would need to plan their units of presentation so as to include logical relationships and interaction with other areas of knowledge. The

team leaders of the different blocks should cooperate and plan extensively to bring such integration about. Because of the importance of this problem some schools might rightly prefer to establish interdisciplinary teams to avoid the ills of too much specialization.

9. SUMMARY

Individualization of instruction is perhaps the most pressing problem in American education today, and a nongraded instructional organization seems to offer the best hope of meeting this need. How else are we to obtain quality education for all of the children of all the people? How else are we to provide a program that will allow slow, average and fast learners to progress within the realm of their individual capabilities? How else are we to fully implement in our educational process what research has shown us concerning child growth and development?

Coupled with team teaching, and consequent better use of teacher talents, school time, and space, nongrading opens the door to meeting the tremendous educational challenges of our time. No other course seems to be either practical or rational if we squarely face the problems in light of the knowledge that we now possess concerning how children grow and learn.

By meeting individual needs within a comprehensive program, we can help each child to realize his own potential and make his greatest contribution to society.

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